

The next two days were spent very much like the first for Viv. She and Marruk would run errands in the morning to make their space more livable, then Viv trained in the afternoon while Arthur prowled and Marruk stood guard. The Kark warrior would join them on occasion by practicing movement and strikes as well. The only major change happened on the night of the second night when Arthur climbed on Viv's lap as she was reading. She sniffed the image, then turned her crimson gaze to her human.

Viv was still unclear on how smart the creature was.

Ah, whatever.

"It's a book. It shows creatures. Look, this is the harren we saw yesterday," she said, turning to the relevant page. Arthur followed her explanations in silence. Viv felt a bit silly until she realized that explaining stuff would help her memorize anyway. So. Might as well.

"And here is a revenant. Remember the revenants? Revenant. It says here that revenants form from dead, uneaten humans who did not receive a proper burial. That means they were just left there on the ground. Look how ugly it is..."

On the dawn of the third day, Viv and Marruk put on their armors and headed to the town center, with Solfis on the sled as an insurance in case things went south. Viv worried about Arthur, fearing that the tiny dragon might not want to enter the deadlands again. They would see when it came to that. Sadly, she had no plan B. Nobody could be trusted with a creature who clearly only related to her. Even Arthur's relationship with Marruk was a tenuous truce, at best.

They made their way to the main plaza, with the massive tree as enchanting now as it had been on the first day. Viv filled her lungs with the last fresh air they would get for a few days while they waited by the temple's entrance, as planned. The statue of Neriad, with his golden eyes, seemed to scrutinize her as she leaned against the sled. Eventually, Farren arrived, wearing light leather armor covered in anti-black runes, and a backpack. He was also armed with a mace and circular shield.

"Errr," Viv said, looking at Marruk. Alas, she found her own confusion reflected on the Kark's broad face.

"Good morning, Viv, Marruk, I apologize for the delay. I had an emergency marriage to officiate."

"Emergency marriage?"

"The father of the bride did not want them to marry. The bride took the groom behind Old Griska's clothier, where she banged him silly. The father agreed to a prompt marriage."

"I, ok, but that's not what I want to talk about. I thought you had a guide to bring us to that cave you wanted cleared?"

“Yes? Me?”

Viv crossed her arms and stared at Farren.

He was not the right choice to accompany them on this mission.

He was definitely not the right choice. At all. She knew he had access to temple guards, though she had not met them on her first visit. Those were elite soldiers and best suited for the task. Accompanying Farren was like taking the head administrator and VIP of a city on a visit to the minefields. It was beyond retarded.

“Does the church even know that you are off.”

“Yes.”

Their eyes met, neither one yielding to the other. Farren’s immediate and firm answer was all Viv needed to understand the little twit’s plan.

“And where, exactly, do they think you are going? And with whom?”

Ah, got the little fucker. Viv was not born yesterday.

“Alright, you win. My intervention is not sanctioned.”

“Can’t you at least bring an escort?”

Farren gave her his most innocent expression. It dripped with pure-hearted incomprehension. Viv wanted to slap him.

“But Bibiane, you are my escort.”

“Tell me what this is all about or I’m heading back.”

“Fine! Fine, hold on. I can explain. I am cooped up in here. I want to get out and see what this is all about. I have directed the Kazar temple for a year and a half and do you know how often I have been to the deadlands? The place we are all about containing? Zero. Zero times.”

“And you think going there by your lonesome is a good idea, oh inspired leader? One wrong move and you can die. At least go get two temple guards to protect you or something.”

“If I do that, I won’t get within ten paces of a single revenant with one arm and a crooked back. I can fight. Let me get one. Just one.”

“...”

“I have militia training at intermediate two.”

Marruk gasped. Viv figured that what he had done was akin to whipping his dick out to show he was male. Or something. He had just revealed something very personal.

“You honor us with your trust!” the mighty Kark woman roared with tears in her yellow eyes.

For fuck sake.

“Listen, I appreciate what you did, but just imagine the reactions if you go with us and end up being hurt?”

“I can get us horses. One per person. And one to drag the sled, free of charge.”
Fuck yes.

“Welcome aboard!”

Farred wore a hood and guided the pair, plus sled, to the gatehouse by the city entrance. There, he borrowed a few horses clad in anti-black intrusion clothes. Viv saw the glint of gold being discreetly exchanged between the branch head and a taciturn member of the guard.

[Horsemaster, not dangerous, a man who—

Yeah ok.

They were led into the stables, and Viv noticed that Marruk clearly disliked the great beasts. She asked Farren about it in a low voice.

“The Kark do not use horses in their steppes. They have great pack beasts called Pakar who fulfill this role. They are an important aspect of Kark culture, while horses are used by the Pure League.”

“I see.”

Despite her clear wariness of those beasts, Marruk gritted her teeth and climbed on. The horses did not seem to care. Viv did not know if it was a skill or something that made them that way, but she had never seen horses so docile.

With three mounts, plus one dragging the sled, they made good way through the fields and up the road heading back to the deadlands. Viv had her own horse, and just hoped they would not have to gallop anywhere. Arthur looked a bit despondent, and sometimes stared at Viv to make sure that, yes, the human wanted to head back into the desolate wasteland like an absolute moron instead of playing in the woods.

They left the marker stones behind and soon, the feverish caress of black mana assaulted Viv through her cape. It was still mild, and it carried with it a certain... appeal, despite the lethality. Black mana liked Viv, and she liked it in return. The two were bound tightly through nature and circumstances. Even if she had been born in this world normally, she thought that she might have enjoyed this color. Even with a much lower affinity.

With so much power available, Viv started to work on manipulation. Solfis had advised her to work on shaping mana in complex patterns as it would help with runes, and she did. It was also much less exhausting than drawing the runes themselves. Such a method was more efficient when mana was plentiful.

She had asked Solfis how her progress was going and he had told her not to worry, and that she would become a powerful caster before magic killed her.

Farren stared with wide eyes when she managed to twist a strand of mana into petals around a circle. It was possible to control her mana even outside of her body, so long as it was still connected to the inside. The farther the strand was, the harder it got.

Farren looked away and the flower dispersed. She drew a dick instead, erased it, and drew a smiley.

Then the first revenant was there.

Marruk was at the head of the formation, with Farren and Viv behind and the horse plus sled following at a sedate pace. The revenant was heading north, but 'she' turned around when she perceived the coming prey. Viv had a look. It was a dead young female peasant with no obvious wounds. She could have died from starvation or exposure, given how thin the cadaver was.

"Well, here is your time to shine, church boy."

Marruk sputtered and Farren placed a gloved hand on his weapon, a mass with a circular head. Without a word, he climbed down his ride and approached the monster. He easily batted the revenant's awkward attack aside with his shield, and cracked her across the head.

“In the name of Neriad!”

There was a flash of golden light, and the revenant fell to ashes.

“Wow. So that’s how they normally do it,” Viv said. Farren turned and gave her a broad grin.

“Your turn, witch! Show me the prowess that made lieutenant Cernit sing your praise.”

Oh, the young twerp was growing confident. Viv turned around and saw another revenant lurching towards them at a distance. He was probably forty to fifty paces away. This one had been a woodman, and he still had desiccated hands grabbing a rusty axe.

“Hey, see that revenant over there?”

Farren turned and immediately spotted who she meant.

A black spear of energy crossed the distance and stabbed the woodsman in the same moment. He pretty much disintegrated into a small pile. Viv had refrained from saying the spell for added cool value. She was so familiar with it that the mnemotechnic help of the incantation was no longer necessary.

Farren turned back to see Viv leaning forward casually on her saddle, face covered but eyes filled with amusement. She splayed her hands and channeled her inner joker.

“It’s... waaah, it’s gone.”

She allowed herself a small smile at Farren’s gaping expression. He looked so young like that, far from the prodigy image he seemed to otherwise cultivate.

After that awesome display, they kept going with Viv simply erasing the revenants they found on the way. Their population was sparse this close to the edge, and so she used the rest of the day to practice shaping. Interestingly, she learned from the way the black mana became hers.

Mana absorption: beginner 2

They made camp in the late afternoon, by a lone guard tower. The church hideout was below the derelict, through a grate, and where she thought there might have been a water reservoir. There were a few revenants around the safehouse.

“Would you like to slay a few more foes, Farren?”

She did not mean to be patronizing, yet for an instant, she feared that he would think her mocking. Thankfully, the Voice of Neriad gripped his mace with firm hands and gave her a nod.

“Yes.”

“Marruk, go with him and protect. I’ll start making camp.”

“I go and protect. Yes.”

The horses were already inside drinking water from a trough. She went to the sled and started to unpack their sleeping rolls.

//Your Grace, there is something I would like to bring to your attention.

“Yes?”

//We are being followed.

Viv turned around, suddenly tense. She eyed the opening with worry, before realizing that if Solfis judged the danger to be imminent, he would have reacted.

“Elaborate.”

//Our pursuer is just one, male from their shape. He followed us since the city, and has remained at a respectable distance.

“So he is not undead then. What else can you tell me?”

//The pursuer most likely follows an infiltration or assassination path.

//Their stealth ability is quite impressive.

//Of course, they are no match for my intricate sensor suite.

//However, neither you nor Marruk stand a chance to locate him, even if you tried.

//Additionally, Farren is aware of his presence.

“How do you know?” Viv asked. She removed fire bricks and a pot from the sled and set out to prepare dinner.

//The Voice of Neriad turned around as we crossed the boundaries with the deadlands.

//The pursuer lowered his visual barrier and allowed our companion to see him.

//Following which, Farren showed detectable signs of being less tense.

“He’s bullshitting us.”

//It could be that he prepared something.

//Or it could be that the pursuer is an insurance, in case you are not as well-intentioned as you seem.

“Confronting Farren might be a problem. On the other hand, we are taking a risk by continuing with him. What if we have a battle on our hands and that spy attacks us in the back?”

//I see two difficulties with confronting Farren.

//First, and as far as I could detect, he was truthful when saying that the cause of his coming was to experience the deadlands and fight its denizens.

//Farren may have extensive experience fooling those with ability to detect falsehood.

//Which can be expected from every teenager raised by the church of Neriad.

//Half-truths and technically correct statements are the tools that he has mastered.

//Therefore, an interrogation could lead to a confrontation we might want to avoid, with few chances of success.

“Is it wise to wait, then?”

//We will learn more if the spy acts.

//I propose to wait until after the cave is cleared.

//If Farren acts in a hostile fashion, this is the optimal moment to do so.

“Normally, I would object to taking such a risk, but...”

//You have me, yes.

“Agreed then.”

Fifteen minutes later, Farren and Marruk returned with tales of victory, as well as a few silver bits and a good knife they found on the remains. Sometimes, the dead kept some of their belongings on them, and there were no reasons to let those go to waste. There were probably tens of thousands of bits in goods and coins to harvest over the plains.

Now that she had access to supplies, traveling no longer had to be miserable for Viv. Dinner was a congee with fresh greens, jerky, bread, and a few fruits and nuts for dessert. The evening soon turned festive despite Viv’s suspicion.

“So, can I ask you personal questions, or is it a diplomatic faux-pas in this corner of the world?”

“It would be a diplomatic faux-pas if our social positions were farther apart, and if there were more people to witness our exchange. As it is, your inquiries are tolerable. I will frown appropriately, or even huff through my nose if I decide that you go too far.”

Oh, she quite liked the young man, it would be a shame to have to kill him if he turned out that he was trying to screw her over.

“Appreciated. So, what’s a young man like you with a promising future doing in a senior position at the ass end of Param? A bit curious.”

Farren chuckled, still very much the smooth representative. He was clearly more at ease fending off questions than revenant arms.

“I was raised in the Neriad complex in Mornyr, the largest of the Northern cities. Mornyr hosts the main branches of more than three religions, including our own. My family is old but they have little power, so when I finished my school days, I was given a choice. Either I could stay in Mornyr as a junior attendant to our Knight-Principal, or I could get a position with a lot of responsibility anywhere on Param.”

“Knight-Principal?”

Marruk shook her head with disapproval.

“The head of our religion,” Farren explained without missing a beat.

“So, why choose that one?”

Farren considers the question for a few seconds.

“I wanted to help my fellow man in their struggle against the encroaching darkness of the undead hordes.”

There is a single, awkward moment of silence as Viv waited for a serious answer.

“Not believing me?”

“No.”

“You know, my class is Voice of Neriad, so I am indeed dedicated to the common good.”

“Of this, I have no doubt, but you feel like someone with a plan. You only told me part of the truth.”

“Yes, very astute. In this case, my plan is to become the next chancellor to the Knight-Principal. You see, by tradition, a Knight-Principal is not an administrator. They are frontline combatants. Our church is designed this way to prevent money and influence to govern us, rather than what is right. To do so, I need to be recommended by a conclave or administrator... or be picked directly by the Knight-Principal himself. As I mentioned, my family has little political power. If I want to pierce through, it must be done here, on the frontline.”

“Very ambitious.”

“It’s not just about power. I fully intend to contribute to the best of my abilities, and I cannot do so if I am too involved in high level politics. One tends to... lose sight of the reality on the ground by staying their whole life in the protected shades of Mornyr’s towers. I want to be the best Voice and the best Voice must start by listening.”

His eyes shone with determination this time, and Viv could feel... not exactly power, but something that came of it? Did faith have a physical manifestation here? Maybe it did, because the echo of those thoughts was both soothing and a little bit uncomfortable. Like clean water on a wound.

Viv asked more questions about Farren and Mornyr, then answered a few of her own in return. She could remain vague and still share that she had a younger brother and that her dad was a politician. Farren frowned when she mentioned that magic was ‘locked’ where she was. Apparently, a few entities throughout the ages had tried to enslave their spellcasters. It rarely lasted long, and never ended well.

They go to bed early that night, not setting a guard. The safehouses had alarms. Viv thought that it was foolish to rely on magical protection alone. She relied on Solfis.